



# On Leadership

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## Our Brain Games

**D**ogs vs. cats. Astronomy vs. astrology. Apples vs. pears. Spider-Man vs. Captain America. It was 11th-grade English class, and as soon as the teacher began writing an endless list of topics on the blackboard, I knew what was coming. The dreaded compare-and-contrast essay.

Panicked (the clock was ticking), I divided a piece of paper in half and started writing as fast as I could: similarities on one side and differences on the other. After a while, I had so many cross-outs and arrows, the only thing I could be sure of was my name at the top of the paper.

These days, paradoxes abound—grit vs. grace, perform vs. transform, speed vs. significance, critique vs. create, execute vs. engage, head vs. heart. One I've seen a lot of lately is self vs. system—or, simply, I vs. we.

It's easy to get caught up in any of these, particularly this one. I recently interviewed someone who told me, "I've already recruited 40 people this year." Really, was it a single-handed endeavor? The same applies with the person who told me a few months ago, "I was responsible for developing 1,000 leaders in 2020." Again, not a solo act. The paradox pendulum should always swing in both directions.

The good news is, we don't have to choose between the opposites. We can find the connections and congruences between them. That's where things get interesting—and messy.

"It's difficult to hold two opposing ideas in our minds, because it creates cognitive dissonance, and we humans don't like that. It's super uncomfortable," Amelia Haynes, a research associate with our Korn Ferry Institute, told me. "But when we can find the congruences between those ideas, the tension resolves, and our brains reward us with a shot of feel-good dopamine."

Kevin Cashman, our global leader of CEO and enterprise leader development, peeled back the layers even further. As he explained it, we all have our patterns—too often leaning in one direction toward what's most comfortable and familiar. But those go-to reactions and knee-jerk behaviors over time can become a rut, or even a derail. As Kevin put it, "Even our neurophysiology gets stuck."

When we get good at something, we build neural pathways that reflect the well-worn habits of how we think and act. Rather than get stuck in a rut, we need to expand our thinking: mastering the balancing act between what appear to be polar opposites but actually complete us.

We can change our minds—literally. But it takes more

paradoxes we need to shift our mindsets so we can expand and reframe our reality.

It starts with taking the time to pause, as Kevin told me. "Stepping back, evaluating, and reflecting become our only chance of rewiring new neural pathways and re-forming patterns. A pause can happen when we reflect on feedback we've received, observe someone we admire, or even when we rest and reflect. That's why the more we pause for the complex and the important, the better we get at synthesizing the dots across polarities and paradoxes."

When we compare and contrast between two opposites—spreadsheet vs. stories, profit vs. people—we use a skill set known as critical thinking. While critical thinking

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can open more possibilities: integrative thinking. It's the opposing muscle that allows us to build integration and congruences.

So if our heads are buried in spreadsheets, perhaps it's time to think more about sto-

ries. If we're only focused on profit, now is the time to elevate people. It's the yin and yang of leadership—seeing the dynamic balance between opposing forces.

With all due respect to what we learned in 11th grade, the dreaded compare-and-contrast no longer serves us in these times. The new world is not one or the other—or one versus another—neither for people nor for ideas. There's room for both and more. Indeed, that's the real brain game-changer. ▀

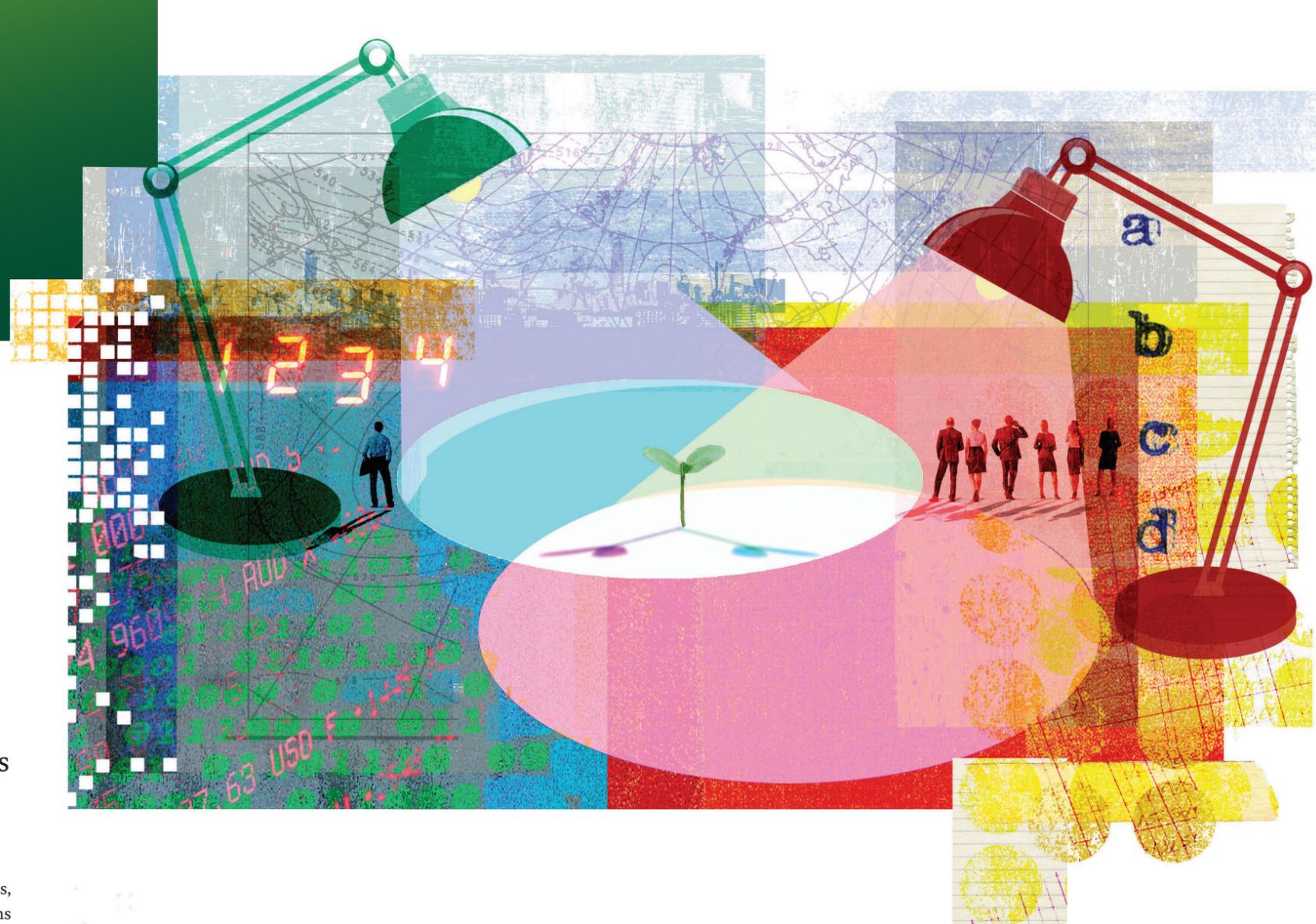


Illustration by Sarah Jones